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Interview with Louie Palu, Canadian award-winning photojournalist who examined communities in the Hard Rock Mining Belt, one of the richest mining regions in the world located in Northwestern Ontario and Northeastern Quebec

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Interview with Louie Palu, Canadian award-winning photojournalist who examined communities in the Hard Rock Mining Belt, one of the richest mining regions in the world located in Northwestern Ontario and Northeastern Quebec

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Sincere thanks to Louie Palu for his kindness and participation.

Louie Palu is a documentary photographer and filmmaker whose work has appeared in festivals, publications, and exhibitions internationally, including the 2012-2013 landmark exhibition "War/Photography: Images of Armed Conflict and Its Aftermath." His work examines social political issues such as human rights, conflict and poverty. In addition to being the recipient of numerous awards including a Pulitzer Center on Crisis Reporting Grant, he is a 2016 John Simon Guggenheim Foundation Fellow and a 2016-2017 Harry Ransom Center Research Fellow in the Humanities at the University of Texas at Austin. After graduating from the Ontario College of Art and Design University in 1991, Palu conducted an in-depth project in the Hard Rock Mining Belt in Northwestern Ontario and Northeastern Quebec. This twelve-year research project documented the life of miners and communities in Cobalt, Kirkland Lake, Virginiatown, Larder Lake, Schumacher, Coniston, Timmins, Sudbury, and Falconbridge in Ontario and Val d'Or in Quebec. This work resulted in the publication of Industrial Cathedrals of the North (Between the Lines, 1999) and Cage Call: Life and Death on the Hard Rock Mining Belt (Photolucida, 2007) with writer Charlie Angus. His subsequent projects chronicled the consequences of

asbestos fiber inhalation in Canada, India, and the U.K., the Canadian combat mission in Kandahar, Afghanistan, life at the Guantanamo Bay prison in Cuba, and the drug war in Mexico. Website: http://louiepalu.photoshelter.com/index

A miner after completing the drilling of a breast in a shrinkage stope, 700 foot level, Cheminis Mine, Larder Lake, Ontario

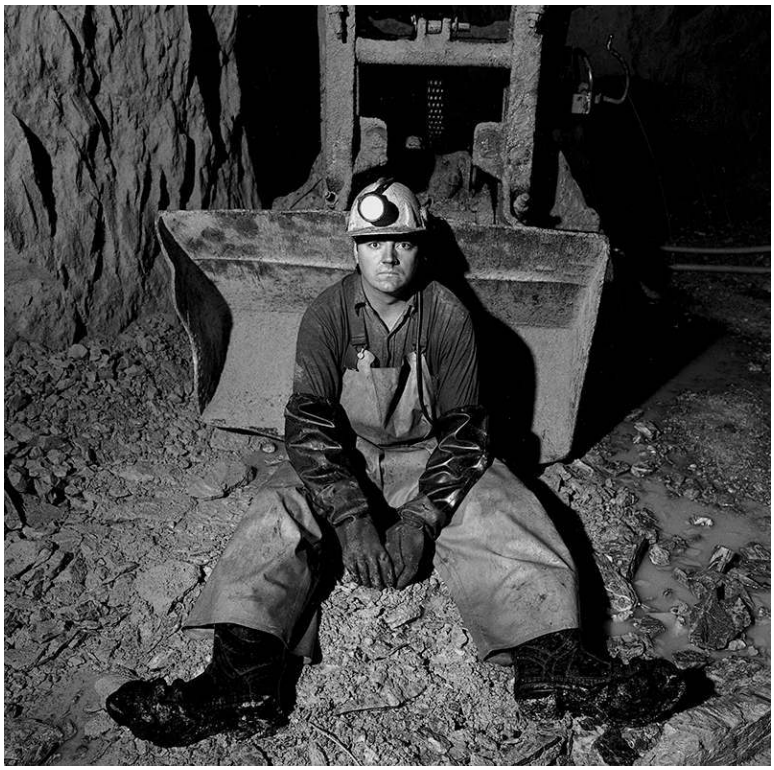
FROM THE BOOK CAGE CALL: LIFE AND DEATH IN THE HARD ROCK MINING BELT. AN IN-DEPTH PROJECT SPANNING OVER 12-YEARS EXAMINING COMMUNITIES IN ONE OF THE RICHEST MINING REGIONS IN THE WORLD LOCATED IN NORTHWESTERN ONTARIO AND NORTHEASTERN QUEBEC IN CANADA.

LUCIE GENAY: You are known for addressing violent themes in your documentary photography and have explained that the subjects you choose are closely connected to the personal stories and family experiences you were told about when you were growing up. What was it that made you want to cover the mining world? Do you make the connection between the mines and theaters of war (e.g. blackened faces, gear, and dust)?

Louie Palu: I make no distinction between any of my photographs; they are all about the human experience. War photographs can be about the making of materials for war like in the mines. Violence is tragically as much a part of our world as peace. We are animals but have a conscience. The possibility of violence exists as our nature and a very integral part of the natural world around us. Nature is just as cruel as it is beautiful.

L.G.: How did you make your selection of the mines and the people you photographed? Why did you choose these areas and these communities?

Steve Allen sitting in front of a CAVO 320 mucking machine, 1450 foot level, Kerr Mine, Virginiatown, Ontario



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L.P.: My parents were immigrant labourers from Italy, everyone on my street were workers who mostly worked in construction or in factories. My parents and all my neighbourhood friends' parents were all children during the Second World War. My first job as a teenager was mixing cement for my father and moving stone, bricks, and materials on a construction site. My mother made coats in a factory as a seamstress and my father was a stonemason. My entire social circle was growing up around workers. My father began working in a stone quarry in a gold mining town (please note he never worked in the mines). He suggested to me after I graduated from art college that these towns had never really been photographed and that they had a remarkable history. He always had this great wisdom about him, so I followed his suggestion on the plan that I was going to complete a one-month portrait project of gold miners. Then it turned into a twelve-year project of photographing and two years of editing the work. Funnily enough the final edit was done in France under the advice of John G. Morris, a legendary American photo editor who lives in Paris.

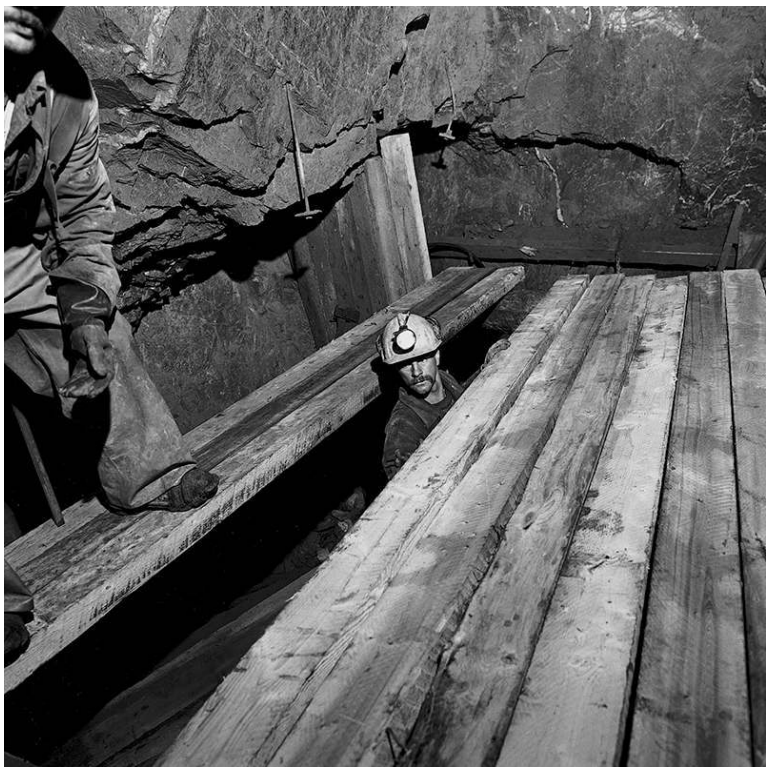
L.G.: On the photographs of Falconbridge, the factory appears very imposing. What did you wish to express through these pictures?

L.P.: That is actually a smelter, which is where all metals after mining, milling, and processing into a liquid form are turned into a more refined metal product. It also now serves as a place where some precious metals (gold and others) are sent for recycling. So that handheld device you have as a phone in your pocket goes through places like

this. This space is a human creation and dwarfs us. Nature creates such beauty and we do as well. However a lot of the beautiful things we create are made using industry such as this.

L.G.: "Modern" mining is usually construed as being done in open-pit mines with numerous safety standards and relatively well-paid personnel, yet it does not seem to be the case in these mines. Why?

Ralph Schmidt and the late Guy Bruneau timbering a staging for drilling a breast in a shrinkage stope, 1300 foot level, Kerr Mine, Virginiatown, Ontario



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L.P.: Actually that is not true. There are two kinds of mining, one being soft rock mining, which is associated with coal and some other materials which can be open pit or underground mines. My photographs are of hard rock mines, which literally means that the resource, which is almost always metals such as gold, silver, copper, zinc, nickel, uranium, and some other rare earth minerals, is contained in hard rock. The choice to mine underground or open pit depends on the geology, quality of the deposit, and place it is located in. Iron mines depend on mass mining because of its low value compared to, say, gold. So the less rock or ground you mine or move without metal in it the more money you make. So in many ways most underground mines are just as modern as open pits. The mines in my photographs have safety standards as well, but they also have a history associated with them involving accidents and some fatalities. Industrial disease is rarely tracked as well such as lung cancer and silicosis. You have to trust me all mines and industrial plants have some current or past history of injuries and deaths. Most countries have safety inspectors because of it. If you do a quick search

of mine deaths in the United States you will see even today it is a dangerous job. On being well paid, well they are depending on where they work in the mine and what their position is. Some mines are located in remote locations where the cost of living is very high as well. Mining is a critical industry in our everyday lives, but we also need to understand its impact on all of us as well.

L.G.: You show particular interest in the miners and their communities. Which aspects were most important to you? The pictures display men suffering after work-related accidents; their bodies are mutilated. The atmosphere is stuffy. Did you want to expose something in particular?

L.P.: Well, there are fifty pictures in the edit. The miners and their communities is what it is all about for me and they are inseparable. It is about seeing something at 360 degrees. All I wanted to do is add another view to balance things out. The industry itself and the government have a very large outreach program and a public relations division for mining and natural resources, which shows their view of the mines, which is a valid view but should not be the only view. I wanted to show the non-company and non-government view from the point of view of an independent witness. The photos breakdown in the following way:

-25 pictures are of the mine and the workers in the mine

-13 pictures of the town and community

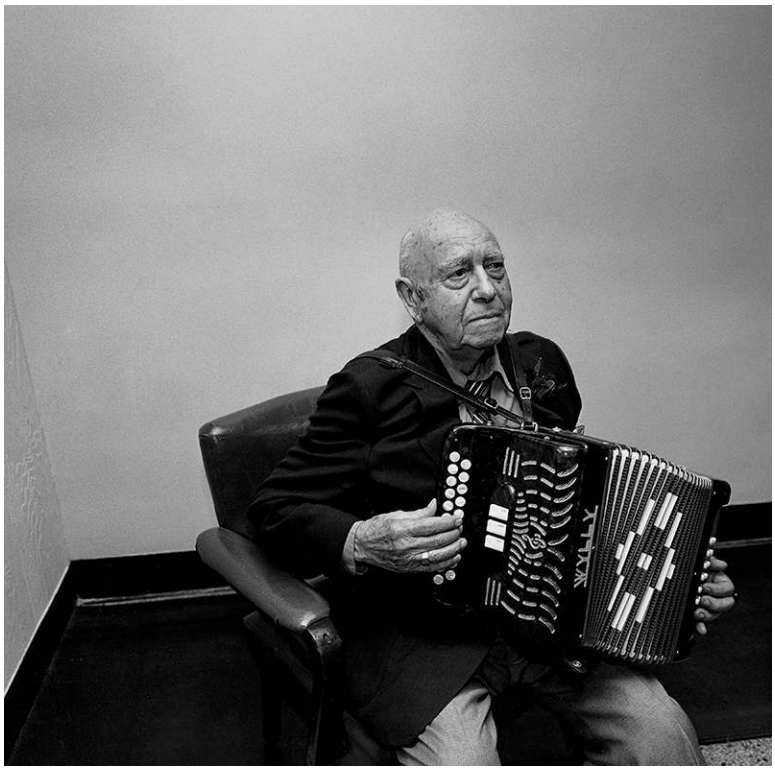
-2 pictures associated with Labour Unions

-7 pictures associated with injuries and 1 death

-3 pictures associated with the environment

I considered many factors in how I edited the body of work. There have been well over 3,000 fatalities in mining in the province of Ontario alone (my project also includes the province of Quebec) where many of these mines exist over the course of 100 years. That does not include disease and injuries. There has been untold environmental destruction to the land as well. There have been a lot of violent labour battles including strikes in this area. I wanted to create a kind of a family photo album that, if I wanted to look at an album of photographs from the point of view of seeing everything that considered every view of the industry, life, and community around the mines, what would that look like? I heard a lot of oral history that had no photographs for it. I could have produced books just on injuries, deaths, or just on labour unions. But in the end I wanted to produce a body of work that considered the whole experience from the point of view of a miner. So there are only seven pictures associated with injuries and one with death. I think that is pretty balanced relatively speaking. This is one of the richest mining regions in the world and this is one of the visual bodies of work representing it. The goal was to give this region a visual history it did not have on all topics and issues.

Retired mine labourer, 89 year old Willie Ciccone, playing the accordion at the Dante Club, Timmins, Ontario



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L.G.: That you know of, what are the differences between the mines you photographed in North America and those located in Central and Latin America?

L.P.: Fundamentally, the mines are all the same except that there is industrialized mining which for me are operated by corporations, which generally follow safety rules. It is funny you ask this question, because one of Canada's largest mining companies, INCO, was taken over by and is owned by a Brazilian company now; they are called Vale, they are one of the largest mining companies in the world. The days when all the mines in Canada, Europe, and the United States were modern and Latin America's were old and worked in by slave labour are largely over, except for some exceptions with small-scale independent mining done by a handful of independent individuals who do not follow environmental or worker safety rules. One of the largest copper mining companies in the world is located in Chile which produces a large part of the world's copper and has very advanced mines. I think there are still photographs we see from photos of small mining operations with miners in their shorts covered in black dust looking like working conditions from 100-years ago and that just is not the only kind of mines that exist in Latin America.

L.G.: Could you tell us more about your photographic approach in this series ? The images are raw and powerful. What impression do you mean to produce in using simple, gimmick-free approaches?

L.P.: Well, I used a square framed camera that makes a 6x6 cm (2 ¼ x 2 ¼ inch) negative and allows for no use of classical compositions like the "Golden Section" or "rule of three's". It is very in your face as a shape. I also did not use color so it was raw and not about color, but rather the subject in the photograph. I also wanted photographs that looked at you, the viewer, meaning the person is looking at you from the photograph and images where you look into the scene. These images were made on traditional film, no Photoshop manipulation, using hard light with no romance to it. I also did not want the grain of the negative to show. It is about the people, not the photographic process, which I made as basic as possible.

Shaft sinker Mario Gagnon (right) celebrating his last weekend in Canada at the Victory Tavern before leaving on a shaft sinking project in Mexico. Timmins, Ontario

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L.G.: By the same token, why did you choose to use black and white? Could you explain how you used the light in photographs such as those at the Kerr Mine in Virginiatown and that of the shaft miner at the Louvicourt Mine in Val d'Or?

L.P.: Many times I was just trying to capture an experience. I tried to make photographs that mirrored how the scene made me feel. The rock had no colour it was dead, so the black and white reflects that for me. There is almost no light down in the mine, so I used existing light like the one of the shaft miner at the Louvicourt Mine or added some flash to demonstrate a job where people work in the dark all day. Try that for unique workplaces located sometimes 10,000 feet (3,048 meters) underground.

Imagine everyday you go 10,000 feet underground, drill holes, make your workplace safe, and then blow it up with explosives. No other job like this exists, except maybe being a soldier in war.

L.G.: How did you want to present the natural landscape around the mines such as the blackened rock at the Coniston Smelter and the lake in Cobalt, Ontario, where tailings pond and arsenic mine waste have been abandoned?

L.P.: Like I said earlier, I edited in a balanced way. There are only 2 photos of environmental destruction in a place where it is all around you. That is 4% of the images, which is pretty balanced. I did not want to make this a book about environmental destruction, but still wanted to show the scale of industry and its cost that we all pay for. These are natural resources we are mining and ones we can destroy as well.

L.G.: Having worked on the impact of uranium tailing piles in the Grants mineral belt in northwestern New Mexico, U.S., the pictures you took of asbestos tailings piles in Thetford Mines, Quebec (Lac d'amiante du Canada) caught my attention. The proximity between houses and the tailings piles is particularly striking. The surrounding, bare landscape seems to be engulfing the little town of Black Lake. What story did you want to tell through these images?

L.P.: My work on asbestos is some of my most important. There are very few photographs as a body of work by one photographer on issues surrounding asbestos. I think what is more important are the pictures of Blayne Kinart a pipefitter who got mesothelioma, a cancer associated with asbestos. I photographed him up until he succumbed to the disease. The town whose workers were all affected by asbestos is an irony: they fought to keep the mine open for jobs when it was about to close, even though it was killing them and affecting their health.

L.G.: Do you know whether the population of Black Lake (former miners for instance) suffers from a high rate of diseases associated with asbestos exposure? Did you meet any victims, such as Blayne Kinart, John Nolan, and Lyle Cassidy[1], or did you want to portray the mine as the epicenter of suffering in the outside world (e.g. in construction work, ship building, the chemical and automobile industries)?

NOTES

1. Blayne Kinart was a former chemical worker who died from mesothelioma, the cancer associated with asbestos exposure, on July 6, 2004 in Sarnia, Ontario, a place nicknamed "Chemical Valley" due to the large number of chemical plants operating in the area. John Nolan had his lung removed after being diagnosed with the same disease in Stevensville, Ontario. He was exposed to asbestos while a renovation was being done beside his office in the 1980s. Lyle Cassidy from Stettler, Alberta, underwent the same operation at Toronto General Hospital. He was exposed to asbestos when working in construction and at a power plant in the 1970s.

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